

Surveiller, faire croire et punir: The Body of Evidence in Luis Rafael Sánchez's La pasión según Antígona Pérez

Marina Bettaglio

The decision to adapt for the present essay the title of Foucault's famous book *Surveiller et punir* comes from a reading of Michel de Certeau's *Arts de faire* (*The Practice of Everyday Life*), in which the French author examines the role of believing and "making people believe" (*faire croire*) in 1970s French society. In that context and in democratic societies in general "[the] capacity for believing seems to be receding everywhere in the field of politics" (De Certeau, *Practice* 178) due to the diminishing function of "authority." When authority is not so present, as is the case in democracies, "believing as a 'modality of assertion'" (178) is no longer crucial. On the other hand, in repressive regimes the state's ability to make people believe is a *conditio sine qua non* for its existence. In the imaginary state of Molina created by Puerto Rican writer Luis Rafael Sánchez for *La pasión según Antígona Pérez* in the late 1960s, the media play an active role in the construction of a reality which suits the whimsical needs of its dictator and is instrumental in the manipulation of public opinion. While journalists spread an adulterated version of reality in order to generate a certain level of consensus, Molina's military police extend a closely knit network of intelligence around society and aim to suppress every form of dissidence.

As is common in a dictatorial regime, the body is trapped in a complex web of power relations. In fact, "[t]error systems transform human bodies into surfaces available for political inscription" (Taylor x). In this Latin American rendering of *Antigone*, the dead bodies of two dissidents killed while carrying out a terrorist attack against the *Generalísimo* Creón Molina thus become a crucial part of the tyrant's repressive strategy. To this end, he has them left exposed in the central square, Plaza Molina, to serve as a public warning. It is Antígona Pérez who reveals Creón's true intention: "El mandato de Creón

era que los cuerpos se pudrieran en la intemperie después de servir de escarmiento público” (Sánchez 73). His plan backfires, though, as the modern tragic heroine abducts the corpses and, like the Greek heroine, buries them. Miss Pérez, an ordinary citizen with an extraordinary name, speaks from the prison cell in which she is held captive to narrate her own version of the story, a version that contrasts with the “official story” circulated by the media. Like her “ancestor,” this contemporary Latin American Antigone has transgressed the law in a defiant act. The burial that constitutes the core of the play, far from having overtly religious implications, acquires a profoundly political and subversive meaning as it deprives the penal system of its signifier. In this sense, given the preeminence of the body within Molina’s judicial system and the role of the press in Sánchez’s version of the Sophoclean drama, the re-rendering of the famous Foucauldian text alluded to in my title takes on an especially full meaning in the context of this and other Latin American rewritings of *Antigone*.

First performed in Puerto Rico in 1968, *La pasión según Antígona Pérez: crónica americana en dos actos* revisits the story of Antigone in light of the political climate of the late 1960s. By updating the Greek myth, Sánchez joins a large number of writers who “por medio de figuras de la mitología clásica indagan y cuestionan la situación de su país” (Moreno 115).¹ Like many prominent playwrights, poets, and novelists, the Puerto Rican writer turns to a key figure of Greek mythology as a way of understanding the complex political situation of the Latin American continent.² As Anna Krajewska-Wieczorek indicates in her analysis of *Two Contemporary Antigones*, “a continuing, necessary determinant in such modern incarnations of the myth has been the conflict between the ethos of authority and the ethos of moral belief—this latter being motivated by religion, duty to the family, or love” (327) or, in this case, political conviction. In a continent plagued by the tyranny of violent military regimes, it is no surprise that this female heroine, in her many incarnations, has been conscripted into ethical struggles for justice.³

Antigone is indeed a character that has fascinated writers, philosophers, and literary critics throughout the centuries. Carol Jacobs has remarked on the multifaceted character of Antigone’s interpretations: “History has offered a long succession of separate, disconnected experiences of *Antigone*—impossible to gather together into a single completed shape” (890). While the exegesis of the Sophoclean play is far from univocal, prominent Hegelian readings in post-colonial settings have centered on the contrast between the

individual and the *polis* as well as on the feminine connection to the family as opposed to the male (patriarchal) state. The German philosopher himself, in fact, focused on Antigone's bond with her brother, a bond that exemplifies the principle of kinship in opposition to Creon's decree, which establishes the male "ethical order" of the state (Hegel 266). Sánchez's play dramatizes the relationship between the individual and the state by creating a fictional country dominated by a dictatorial regime. Yet the traditional antithesis family/state is complicated by Antígona's relationship with the deceased. Unlike the Greek heroine, Antígona has no siblings; she is not blood-related to the Tavárez brothers whose bodies she buried. Her kinship is based on ideological principles, on a common cause against the despotism of Creón Molina. The sepulture of the two brothers, which echoes Antigone's burial of her brother Polynices, is more than a symbolic act because it attacks the heart of the regime's punitive system. As an "example of anti-authoritarianism" (Butler 1), Antígona Pérez is the personification of Latin American countries' struggle against foreign-aided despots.

In his characterization of Antigone, the Puerto Rican writer seems to have responded to the echo resonating from Anderson Imbert's critique of Jean Anouilh's *Antigone*. In reaction to the French version of the play, which was considered devoid of dramatic force, the well known Argentinian critic in *Los grandes libros de occidente* wishes for "una *Antígona* política, mártir de un anárquico desafío al Estado" (20). Whether Sánchez was aware of Imbert's suggestion is hard to ascertain; still, it accurately describes Antígona Pérez's unrelenting struggle against a form of oppression marked by neo-colonialism. His Antígona stands as a symbol of freedom for the American continent. As his protagonist proudly exclaims, "Antígona es otro nombre para la idea viva, obsesionante, eterna de la libertad" (Sánchez 120).

It has been said that the history of Latin America bears witness to a yearning for freedom in a struggle against multiple forms of tyranny often centering on the solitary figure of *el tirano*. Such political absolutism begins to loom on the horizon at the time of the consolidation of the independent nation-states and acquires different names and shapes throughout the decades. In the case of Argentina, which has suffered a series of violent military dictatorships, it is no surprise that after the "Dirty War" (1976-83) the Sophoclean heroine returns to the southern hemisphere to denounce the national tragedy of the *desaparecidos*. Like Ariosto's Orlando, she sees her fame and fortune change significantly, and with the worsening of the Argentine political situ-

ation, her defiance turns into rage; Antigone thus reappears in Argentina in 1989 as Griselda Gambaro's *Antígona furiosa*.

While Gambaro's *Antígona furiosa* engages a well-defined political situation rooted in a specific place and time, the fictitious setting of Luis Rafael Sánchez's play has an atemporal character. Nevertheless, in both cases "the *Antigone* plot specifically raises questions about political leadership and misrule, about the conflict between the so-called private and public spaces, about public fear and complicity, about a population's duty to act as a responsible witness to injustice, and about social practices and duties predicated on sexual differences" (Taylor 209). Antigone's defiant act, which reveals the contrast of the individual to the state, has a highly destabilizing effect. In the imaginary state of Molina it becomes an emblem of the desperate condition of many Latin American countries devastated by the violence of US-aided military regimes. Though not identifiable with any "real" Latin American country, Molina sums up the characteristics of many dictatorships. Its fictitious character also alludes to the alterity of the American continent in the eyes of the European colonizers, who were struck by the magical qualities of the newly discovered lands.

The political overtones are immediately visible as the author stresses the setting of the play at a time when García Márquez problematized the establishment of a Latin American nation-state through the rise and fall of the imaginary city state of Macondo. Yet, while *Cien años de soledad* displays the impossibility of the foundation of the modern Latin American nation-state vis-à-vis foreign powers (Sommer 27), *La pasión según Antígona Pérez* broaches the possibility of national redemption through personal self-immolation. The choice of the word "passion" brings to the foreground the Christian component of Antígona's sufferings; it is reminiscent of Christ's own passion on the cross on behalf of all humankind. But Antígona's message does not coincide with that of the Catholic Church, as its representative, Monseñor Bernardo Escudero, has become an agent of Molina's repressive regime and thus uses religion precisely as "the opium of the masses," in Marx's familiar phrase. Even his last name expresses his role within the political system: as an *escudero*, a squire, literally "he who carries the shield," this monsignor protects the regime with the shield of his doctrine. The church, traditional ally of the Catholic Kings in the conquest of the New World, appears as the spokesman of the dictator himself. "Por su boca habla Creón," Antígona explains, when the religious authority tries to convince the young woman to abandon her political struggle and reveal the burial site of Mario and Héctor Tavárez (82).

As a link to the literary history of Latin America, the subtitle *crónica americana en dos actos* inserts this play into the five-hundred-year tradition of chronicles of the conquest; to do so is to evoke one of the most widely employed narrative strategies in the history of the New World. As a genre, the chronicle was employed mostly by the conquerors, who had a vested interest in the subject matter. Told mostly from the vantage point of Europeans, the chronicle, as a narrative growing out of a linear arrangement of events, is, as De Certeau puts it,

writing that conquers. It will use the New World as if it were a blank, “savage” page on which Western desire will be written. It will transform the space of the other into a field of expansion for a system of production. From the moment of a rupture between a subject and an object of the operation, between a *will to write* and a *written body* (or a body to be written), this body fabricates Western history. (*Writing* xxv-xxvi)

Against the oppression of those who write history through their daily misrepresentation of reality (in this case the state-controlled newspapers), against the “invention” of America through a narrative form, against the appropriation of America as a naked female body, Antígona Pérez occupies central stage to tell her own chronicle, her own version of the facts. As the embodiment of the *mestizaje* that characterizes the American continent, this young woman “resume en su físico el cruce de razas en que se asienta el ser hispanoamericano” (Sánchez 13). From her prison cell, she speaks up with a resolute tone to denounce his-story, Creón Molina’s story: “Sí. Quiero hablar. De los que crecimos en una América dura, América amarga, América tomada. De las generaciones, dolorosamente, estranguladas” (14). Antígona inserts her personal history within that of an entire continent, defined by the general name of America but modified by adjectives that indicate her sufferings along with her subjugation at the hands of an imperialistic power.

The result is a harsh and embittered America, a violated territory, taken by force, *tomada*, reminiscent of Cortázar’s short story, *Casa tomada*, an allegory of a silently creeping oppression which impinges upon the personal lives of two common citizens to the point of taking possession of their house and driving them away from their familiar environment. While in Cortázar’s story the oppressive power is an invisible, nameless entity, Antígona gives a name and a face to those implicated in the sufferings of an oppressed and strangulated country: “Los periódicos han inventado una verdad que no es cierta, los periódicos enfermos de fiebre amarilla. Una historia sin escrúpulos,

maligna, improvisada con el afán de destruir mi nombre y mi reputación” (14). In order to counteract the defamatory campaign orchestrated by the media, she offers her own version: “Habrà, pues, dos versiones de una misma verdad. La mía. La de ellos. La mía es simple” (14).

Shattering the illusion of the existence of one unique truth as well as the illusion of naturalistic representation, Antígona Pérez resorts to a Brechtian technique to recount her personal sufferings, making them representative of the tragedy of her country and hemisphere. She is thus part and parcel of the story as the narrator and personification of her national trauma, which seems to have been predetermined for her by her father’s heroic aspiration, “inclinación a lo heroico” (14). Her father’s choice of name for her becomes her destiny; as Loreina Santos Silva indicates, “No es incidental que el padre de Antígona, quien había iniciado la lucha en contra de la dictadura, provocando los disturbios en la Universidad y acarreándose con ello su propia muerte, escogiera ese nombre para su hija” (439). Functioning like the Greek *onoma*, her name reveals her essential characteristics, and it does so in the first scene. Her soliloquy from the dungeon of the Presidential palace where she is held captive is soon interrupted by a clever play of lights that transforms the stage to reveal, alternatively, Antígona’s prison cell and an enormous mural filled with newspaper clips. In both cases, in contrast with a naturalistic setting, the stage is completely devoid of furniture. A complex system of lights allows for the switch between the two places and, occasionally, for the simultaneous representation of two contrasting points of view. The barren darkness from which Antígona speaks, illuminated only by “un chorro cónico de luz” (Sánchez 13), contrasts with the huge mural, a monument to Creón’s propagandistic apparatus. This scenographic structure, “suma de ocho columnas gigantescas y tridimensionales” (11), is divided into two parts, one that indicates the influence of consumerism in the form of advertisements and the other devoted to “información periodística” (11), including photographs pertinent to the subject matter of the play: “las monumentales fotos del Generalísimo Creón Molina en gala militar y Antígona Pérez luchando con la guardia de palacio” (11), surrounded by political slogans supporting the national party, i.e. the Democracia Cristiana.

Against this background, the journalists who, according to Hasbein, constitute the modern version of the chorus, shout their headlines, a mixture of local and international news that reveals the political climate of Molina. While the Greek chorus expressed the viewpoint of the *polis*, in this city-state

dominated by the tyrannical power of its “founding father” even the voice of the chorus echoes that of its dictator. This becomes apparent in their manipulation of reality with regard to the news of April 13, the day when the Tavárez brothers are killed during their attempt to put an end to Creón’s dictatorship, and to Antígona’s detention in the dungeon of Molina’s palace. “La facinerosa Antígona Pérez que enterrara los cadáveres de los alzados del pasado trece de abril, se ha resistido a los interrogatorios de las más altas autoridades de la República” (17), reads one of the headlines. In contrast with the home front, the international scene reflects the salient facts of the time, including the US support for Latin American military regimes, Jean-Paul Sartre’s refusal to accept the Nobel Prize, and information about horrible tortures suffered by Brazilian political prisoners.

La multitud, echoing the journalist’s point of view, reaffirms the state-approved values with a series of slogans, such as “Triunfo de la ley, la medida y el orden” (19). Against this “representation” of the facts, Antígona speaks up by explaining that the order that people praise is “[o]rden que nace de la diaria inspección militar. Orden que nace del diario asentimiento de las cabezas. Orden que nace del diario aplauso de las manos. Enfermo, pobre, caótico orden que impone el ordenado Creón” (20). But the mass of people, which constitutes another chorus in this tragedy, has been reduced to silence by the years of dictatorship they endured. If they insist that “[l]a culpable es Antígona Pérez” (51) and voice their support for the regime, it is because they live in “un estado de castración psicológica” (Santos Silva 442) caused by harsh military repression and daily journalistic propaganda.

Fear of torture and other kinds of corporeal punishment induces male citizens to support the official version of the facts, but, as Antígona explains, “Ese orden llega a ser la otra cara del miedo” (Sánchez 20). The brutality and arbitrariness of the judicial system derive from its peculiar status as the emanation of its ruler’s will. Creón, in fact, is the supreme authority in his country and thus the absolute sovereign of the legal process. Fear of punishment goes hand in hand with fear of the “Prince,” who, following the well-known Machiavellian principle, prefers rather “essere temuto che amato,” [“to be feared than loved”] (69). The omnipresence of fear is confirmed by Antígona’s mother who, in an attempt to justify her conformism, explains: “El miedo es lo único libre en la ciudad. El miedo que es como Dios porque siendo uno se está en todas partes” (Sánchez 32). Power is generated by tight control over every aspect of daily existence: “El régimen de Creón nos

impuso una vigilancia estrecha, asfixiante” (32), insists Antígona’s mother in an attempt to justify her cowardly behavior towards her daughter. In fact in the political climate of this totalitarian regime, dominated by the will to power of its despotic monarch, punishment towers over the people. It is out of fear that this bourgeois woman has turned against her own daughter, “[e]l mismo miedo atroz que una mañana saca a la hija de la casa” (32), as she confesses. The centrality of punishment in Creón’s tyrannical government casts a dark shadow over the entire country.

In clear contrast to Western societies whose judicial system is set up in such a way that “[p]unishment, then, will tend to become the most hidden part of the penal process” (Foucault 9), in Molina it still plays a crucial role in the dictator’s political tactics. Presiding over the state, punishment performs a social function in its absolute visibility as public spectacle (23). The body, due to its visibility and susceptibility to pain, becomes the preferential locus of punishment in a complex network of power relationships: “The body is also directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs” (25-26). Its signification becomes instrumental to the dictator’s repressive strategy, which aims at the subjugation of every possible act of rebellion or defiance.

Aware of the dramatic potential of the exposure of dead bodies, Creón Molina intends to make a spectacle of his political enemies’ death, hence the decision to display in the public square the bodies of the Tavárez brothers, who had suicidally made an attempt on his life. In order to set an example for the entire population, Creón has their bodies “displayed, exhibited in procession, tortured, served as the public support of a procedure that had hitherto remained in the shade; in him, on him, the sentence had to be legible for all” (Foucault 43). If the body becomes the signifier for the punishment, what happens, then, when that “body of evidence,” the monument to the state’s repressive power, disappears? The absence of the bodies that constitute the focal point of Creón’s punitive system sabotages his political plan, for this absence deprives his system of its symbolic value. Moreover, it undermines Creón’s authority as it reveals the presence of a serious threat to his power, that is, the presence of an organized resistance that escapes his control and points to the state’s impotence against unknown forms of dissidence.

The intention of the two dissidents, as Antígona explains, was exactly to create a breach in Creón’s controlling system and thus provoke a crisis. “Los Tavárez planearon asesinar a Creón. Estaban convencidos de que su

muerte provocaría la crisis que llevaría a algo menos inútil que esa dictadura” (Sánchez 27-28). What Antígona alludes to is the sacrifice of a heroic figure in order to destabilize the political situation, a sacrifice akin to that of many Latin American political martyrs who gave their lives for a political ideal. As Jean Franco aptly argues, “especially in the sixties... there was a resurgence of the hero myth around guerrilla leaders like Che Guevara” that finds a narrative echo in many novels characterized by “an exploration of heroism, sacrifice, and failure” (129). In reaction to the powerful figure of *el tirano*, Latin American literature pays homage to another male hero, Polynices, whose tragic fate is remembered both in the opening of García Márquez’s first novel *La hojarasca* (1955) and in Roa Bastos’s novel *Yo el supremo*. “Mourning the death of Polynices,” Franco continues, “these novels become the surrogates for Antigone herself” (130), whose presence, one could argue, is relegated to the stage. The fact that in Sánchez’s play the perpetrator of a subversive act is a woman, considered a weak, second-rate citizen according to the prevailing machista mentality, adds to the danger. Having abducted those bodies, considered the property of the state, and then having buried them in a secret place, Antígona Pérez removes them from the control of the state, thus threatening the annihilation of a system of signification that uses the body as an instrument to perpetuate fear and oppression. Antígona knows this when she says: “Sí, sí, Creón está acorralado por el miedo. En sus sótanos ha aprisionado a una mujer. Peor. Una muchacha. Una muchacha es culpable de dar sepultura a dos amigos a quienes quería como a hermanos. Creón teme que el resquicio del malestar se haya abierto” (Sánchez 33). Since in Molina, as opposed to the Sophoclean Creon’s Thebes, the burial of dead rebels cannot be considered a crime, Antígona Pérez is charged with the robbery of state property, which has an essential function within the economy of signification of this dictatorial regime.

In a society in which killing glorifies the strength of its *lider máximo*, the absence of the executed bodies produces a highly destabilizing effect. Creón, who understands the threat posed by the absence of the corpses, arrests Antígona and throws her into jail, hoping to get her to reveal the burial place of the stolen bodies and thus restore an essential piece to a network of power in which he occupies the most prominent position. Having instituted a judicial system in which the awareness both of punishment and of its atrocious theatricality is meant to discourage any defiance, the tyrant desperately needs to recover the very showpiece of his corrective system.⁴ Yet, regardless of the harsh consequences she faces, Antígona Pérez does not budge; firm in

her convictions, she manages to sabotage Creón's power by asserting control over, and restoring dignity to, the very locus of the tyrant's repression: the human body itself.

University of Victoria

Notes

¹ For a discussion of the importance of Greek theatre in twentieth-century Latin American dramaturgy, see Palamides.

² For a history of the myth of Antigone from its origin to the present, see Bañuls Oller and Crespo Alcalá.

³ The history of the relationship between Latin American writers and playwrights to Greek literature is a complex one as it foregrounds the positionality of a post-colonial continent vis-à-vis a Eurocentric tradition. While Cuban writer Virgilio Piñera alludes to the universality of the Greek sources by inserting Latin American literature within a European framework, Luis Rafael Sánchez is interested in reconciling the position of the Europhiles with the point of view of those who advocate for an autonomous cultural tradition. His struggle is not for inclusion in the Western canon, but for the inclusion of his island, Puerto Rico, within the Latin American context (Barradas 39).

⁴ This stands in opposition to what Foucault postulates, i.e. the fact that "it is the certainty of being punished and not the horrifying spectacle of public punishment that must discourage crime" (9).

Works Referenced

- Anderson Imbert, Enrique. *Los grandes libros de Occidente*. Mexico City: Ediciones de Andrea, 1957.
- Bañuls Oller, José Vicente, and Patricia Crespo Alcalá. *Antígona(s): mito y personaje: un recorrido desde los orígenes*. Bari, Italy: Levante, 2008.
- Barradas, Efraín. *Para leer en puertorriqueño: Acercamiento a la obra de Luis Rafael Sánchez*. Río Piedras, Puerto Rico: Editorial Cultural, 1981.
- Bellini, Giuseppe. *De tiranos, héroes y brujos*. Roma: Bulzoni, 1982.
- Bastos Roa, Augusto. *Yo el supremo*. Madrid: Cátedra, 2004.
- Butler, Judith. *Antigone's Claim: Kinship between Life and Death*. New York: Columbia UP, 2000.
- Cortázar, Julio. "Casa tomada." *Bestiario*. Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 1966.
- De Certeau, Michel. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Trans. Steven Rendall. Berkeley, CA: U of California P, 1984; reprint, 1988.
- _____. *The Writing of History*. Trans. by Tom Conley. New York: Columbia UP, 1988.
- Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. New York: Pantheon, 1977.

- Franco, Jean. *Plotting Women: Gender and Representation in Mexico*. New York: Columbia UP, 1989.
- Gambaro, Griselda. *Teatro*. Tomo 3. Buenos Aires: Ediciones de la Flor, 1989.
- García Márquez, Gabriel. *La hojarasca*. Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 1974.
- _____. *Cien años de soledad*. Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 1967.
- Hegel, G. W. F. *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Trans. A. W. Miller. Oxford, New York: Oxford UP, 1977.
- Jacobs, Carol. "Dusting Antigone." *MLN* 11.5 (1996): 890-917.
- Krajewska-Wieczorek, Anna. "Two Contemporary Antigones." *New Theatre Quarterly* 10.40 (1994): 327-30.
- Machiavelli, Niccolò. *Il principe e discorsi*. Milano: Feltrinelli, 1960.
- Moreno, Iani del Rosario. "La contextualización de Antígona en el teatro argentino y brasileño a partir de 1968." *Latin American Theatre Review* 30.2 (1997): 115-29.
- Palamides, Costa. "Mito griego y teatro latinoamericano del siglo XX." *Primer Acto* 229 (1989): 56-59.
- Sánchez, Luis Rafael. *La pasión según Antígona Pérez: crónica americana en dos actos*, 2nd ed. Hato Rey, Puerto Rico: Ediciones Lugar, 1970.
- Santos Silva, Loreina. "La pasión según Antígona Pérez: una mujer como reafirmadora de la dignidad política." *Revista/Review Interamericana* 11.3 (1981): 438-43.
- Sommer, Doris. *Foundational Fictions: The National Romances of Latin America*. Berkeley, CA: U of California P, 1993.
- Taylor, Diana. *Disappearing Acts: Spectacle, Gender and Nationalism in Argentina's "Dirty War"*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1997.

